

Remarks on the Situation in Iraq and an Exchange With Reporters

November 15, 1998

The President. Good morning. Last night Iraq agreed to meet the demands of the international community to cooperate fully with the United Nations weapons inspectors. Iraq committed to unconditional compliance. It rescinded its decisions of August and October to end cooperation with the inspectors. It withdrew its objectionable conditions. In short, Iraq accepted its obligation to permit all activities of the weapons inspectors, UNSCOM and the IAEA, to resume in accordance with the relevant resolutions of the U.N. Security Council.

The United States, together with Great Britain, and with the support of our friends and allies around the world, was poised to act militarily if Iraq had not reversed course. Our willingness to strike, together with the overwhelming weight of world opinion, produced the outcome we preferred: Saddam Hussein reversing course, letting the inspectors go back to work without restrictions or conditions.

As I have said since this crisis began, the return of the inspectors, if they can operate in an unfettered way, is the best outcome because they have been, and they remain, the most effective tool to uncover, destroy, and prevent Iraq from rebuilding its weapons of mass destruction and the missiles to deliver them.

Now, let me be clear: Iraq has backed down, but that is not enough. Now Iraq must live up to its obligations.

Iraq has committed to unconditionally resume cooperation with the weapons inspectors. What does that mean? First, Iraq must resolve all outstanding issues raised by UNSCOM and the IAEA. Second, it must give inspectors unfettered access to inspect and to monitor all sites they choose with no restrictions or qualifications, consistent with the memorandum of understanding Iraq itself signed with Secretary-General Annan in February. Third, it must turn over all relevant documents. Fourth, it must accept all weapons of mass destruction-related resolutions. Fifth, it must not interfere with the

independence or the professional expertise of the weapons inspectors.

Last night, again, I confirmed with the U.N. Security-General, Kofi Annan, that he shares these understandings of Iraq's obligations.

In bringing on this crisis, Iraq isolated itself from world opinion and opinion in the region more than at any time since the Gulf war. The United Nations Security Council voted 15-0 to demand that Saddam Hussein reverse course. Eight Arab nations—Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, five other Gulf states—warned Saddam that Iraq alone would bear responsibility for the consequences of defying the United Nations. The world spoke with one voice: Iraq must accept once and for all that the only path forward is complete compliance with its obligations to the world. Until we see complete compliance, we will remain vigilant; we will keep up the pressure; we will be ready to act.

This crisis also demonstrates, unfortunately, once again, that Saddam Hussein remains an impediment to the well-being of his people and a threat to the peace of his region and the security of the world. We will continue to contain the threat that he poses by working for the elimination of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction capability under UNSCOM, enforcing the sanctions and the no-fly zone, responding firmly to any Iraqi provocations.

However, over the long term, the best way to address that threat is through a Government in Baghdad—a new Government—that is committed to represent and respect its people, not repress them, that is committed to peace in the region. Over the past year we have deepened our engagement with the forces of change in Iraq, reconciling the two largest Kurdish opposition groups, beginning broadcasts of a Radio Free Iraq throughout the country. We will intensify that effort, working with Congress to implement the Iraq Liberation Act, which was recently passed, strengthening our political support to make sure the opposition—or to do what we can to make the opposition a more effective voice for the aspirations of the Iraqi people.

Let me say again, what we want and what we will work for is a Government in Iraq that represents and respects its people, not

represses them, and one committed to live in peace with its neighbors.

In the century we are leaving, America has often made the difference between tyranny and freedom, between chaos and community, between fear and hope. In this case, as so often in the past, the reason America can make this difference is the patriotism and professionalism of our military. Once again, its strength, its readiness, its capacity is advancing America's interest and the cause of world peace. We must remain vigilant, strong, and ready, here and wherever our interests and values are at stake. Thanks to our military, we will be able to do so.

Unconditional Compliance With U.N. Resolutions

Q. Mr. President, what you just said today sounds a lot less tough, sir, than what your National Security Adviser said yesterday. He called it, what Iraq said, "unconditionally unacceptable," and he said it had more holes than Swiss cheese.

The President. That's right, and look what they did after we said that. That's right—look what's happened since they said that. We decided to delay the attack when we were informed that Iraq was going to make a—offer us a statement—the world, committing to complete compliance. And you will recall, when that statement came in, there were members of the international community and members of the Security Council who said that they thought that the statement was sufficient to avoid a military conflict and to get UNSCOM back in. We did not agree, and the British did not agree. Mr. Berger and Prime Minister Blair both went out and made statements to that effect.

After that occurred, we received three subsequent letters from the Government of Iraq, going to the President of the Security Council, dealing with the three big holes we saw in the original Iraqi letter.

First of all, it became clear, and they made it clear, that the attachment to the letter was in no way a condition of their compliance, that their compliance was not conditional. Secondly, they explicitly revoked the decisions they made in August and October to suspend cooperation with UNSCOM. And thirdly, they made it clear that they would

not just let the inspectors back in to wander around in a very large country but that their cooperation with them would be unconditional and complete.

Those were the things which occurred after Mr. Berger spoke and after Prime Minister Blair spoke. Those were the things which have caused us to conclude that with world opinion unanimous and with the ability to actually—the prospect, at least—of getting this inspection system going until we can complete the work that we have been working on now since the end of the Gulf war—it was those three things that made us believe we should go forward. That is the difference between where we are now and where we were yesterday when the United States and Great Britain made its statements.

Q. Mr. President—[inaudible]—

Q. Mr. President—[inaudible]—

The President. Wait. Wait. Wait a minute.

Q. Why is there any reason to believe that Iraq will comply this time when it has failed to do so repeatedly in the past?

The President. Well, I think there are four things that I would say about it, with the beginning that no one can be sure. We're not—this is not a question of faith; this is a question of action. Let me remind you, the most important sentence in the statement I just read you was, "Iraq has backed down, but that's not enough. Now Iraq must live up to its obligations."

Now, let me just point out four things. Number one, we have an unprecedented consensus here. I do not believe that anyone can doubt that there was an unprecedented consensus condemning what Saddam Hussein had done in not cooperating with UNSCOM. Number two, we had a very credible threat of overwhelming force, which was imminent had we not received word that Iraq was prepared to make the commitments we had been asking for. Number three, the set of commitments we received, in the end, after making our position clear yesterday in refusing to negotiate or water down our position, is clear and unambiguous. And number four, we remained ready to act. So we don't have to rely on our feelings here, or whether we believe anything. The question is, have we made the proper judgment to suspend any military action in order to give Iraq a

chance to fulfill its commitments, even though it has failed to do so, so many times in the past.

These four things are what you have to keep in mind. I believe—let me just say this—I believe we have made the right decision for a very specific reason, and I think it's very important that we keep hammering this home. If we take military action, we can significantly degrade the capability of Saddam Hussein to develop weapons of mass destruction and to deliver them, but that would also mark the end of UNSCOM. So we would delay it, but we would then have no oversight, no insight, no involvement in what is going on within Iraq.

If we can keep UNSCOM in there working and one more time give him a chance to become honorably reconciled by simply observing United Nations resolutions, we see that results can be obtained.

Look, what has happened this year? We had the VX testing, and this summer—I can't remember exactly when it was; I'm sure that when my team comes up here to answer the questions, they can—we uncovered a very important document giving us—giving the world community information about the quantity and nature of weapons stocks that had not been available before.

So I have to tell you, you have to understand where I'm coming from here. I really believe that if you have a professional UNSCOM, free and unfettered, able to do its job, it can do what it is supposed to do in Iraq. And given the fact that I believe that over the next 10 to 20 years, this whole issue of chemical and biological weaponry will be one of the major threats facing the world, having the experience, the record, and the success—if we can do it—of having a United Nations inspection regime in Iraq can have grave positive implications for the future—profound positive implications, if it works—and grave implications in a negative way if it doesn't.

So I believe we made the right decision, and I believe that the factors that I cited to you make it the right decision. Now, what I—

Q. Mr. President—

The President. Wait. Wait. Wait. What I'd like to do now—you, naturally enough, want

to get into a lot of the specific questions here that I believe that Secretary Cohen and General Shelton and Mr. Berger can do a good job of answering. And none of us have had a great deal of sleep, but I think it would be appropriate for me to let them answer the rest of the questions.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:30 a.m. in the Briefing Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to President Saddam Hussein of Iraq; United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan; and Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom. The President also referred to the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Remarks on the Tobacco Settlement *November 16, 1998*

Thank you very much. To Attorney General Gregoire and all the others who are here, and the attorneys general of North Carolina and California, who are not here but who are part of this initial group, I want to congratulate you. Bruce Reed, who spoke first and is my Domestic Policy Adviser, and I, and the rest of us have been at this for quite a long time, and we are very pleased by your success.

Situation in Iraq

Because this is my only opportunity to appear before the press today, I'd like to begin by making a few comments about the situation in Iraq.

I am pleased that the weapons inspectors will return to Baghdad tomorrow to resume their work. As I've said from the start, the best outcome is to get the inspectors back on the job, provided they have unfettered access and full cooperation.

We know what the inspectors can accomplish. Since the system was created and the inspections began, Iraq has been forced to declare and destroy, among other things, nearly 40,000 chemical weapons, nearly 700 tons of chemical weapons agents, 48 operational missiles, 30 warheads especially fitted for chemical and biological weapons, and a massive biological weapons plant equipped to produce anthrax and other deadly agents.